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Campus Activism: The Qualitative Difference

GRINNELL, Iowa—This spring the campus of Grinnell College has been, if not a hotbed of protest and activism, at least a seedbed. The activists here are part of a resurgence of the national movement on campuses from UCLA and Columbia to Syracuse and the University of Wisconsin. At Grinnell, as at other schools, the focus is on the racism in South Africa.

College campuses are not dead, as we've been told. Nor has there been a massive freeze-drying of concern about social justice and personal commitment.

Grinnell's manicured campus rests amid the black-earth farmlands of central Iowa, as far away from trouble as an Oriental potentate on his mountaintop. The institution's large endowment—about \$140 million—and small enrollment of 1,200 students make it one of the most financially secure colleges in America. The fresh, pungent

odor of the earth matches the smell of success that students breathe in from a faculty that is both scholarly and caring.

During the winter, a group of students began researching the investment policies of the college in multinational companies doing business in South Africa. Three weeks ago, the students submitted to the trustees a 25-page proposal to redirect some \$10 million from companies that were involved in South Africa. A few days ago, the board of trustees met and agreed that the time for selective divestment had come. A committee has been established—three trustees, two students and one nonvoting administrator—to shift the investments.

For a time, there was talk among some students about taking over the administration building. The good old days—the hot old days—were re-

called. In 1971, a group of protesters had shut down the library as a way of seeking changes in programs for black students.

This year, no occupation—and no clenched fists and no bullhorns—occurred.

When comparisons are made between this generation of college students and those of the 1960s, the protests of today are more sophisticated and potentially more effective. At Grinnell, the style has been confrontation without contempt. The board of trustees was not made into evil incarnate. It was seen as a group of people to be persuaded, not figureheads to be bludgeoned.

The sophistication in the apartheid protests of the mid-1980s, as against the anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s and early 1970s, is in being able to see that the destructiveness of institutional violence can be as im-

moral as military violence. The students at Grinnell are saying that merely by being at the school they have a complicity in the oppression of blacks in South Africa. Their 25-page proposal is a way of ending that complicity.

In the midst of a lush springtime in the middle of Iowa, the connection between your school's portfolio and racism 8,000 miles away isn't much of a pump to get the adrenalin flowing. It is not the same as venting against a war your government may be sending you to, as was Vietnam. Yet it is powerful all the same.

Discernment—not the usual virtue of the young—is on graphic display at places such as Grinnell as the students attack the more evasive evil of institutional violence. It was pointed out that research into the school's investments ought to go further, to see how many military contractors are getting Grinnell

money. That issue, some of the students say, is next.

The list of campus protest involvements is long: nuclear disarmament, Central America, the sanctuary movement, CIA recruitment. At the moment, only stirrings are being seen. Many campuses still slumber on.

One who has seen demonstrations of the past when property damage and us-against-them tactics were the fashion is Prof. Neil Katz of Syracuse University's Program for Nonviolent Conflict and Change. As many as 100 colleges and universities are now offering majors or minors in conflict resolution, he says, with several hundred more schools offering courses. That is the qualitative difference between now and then, Katz believes: in the classrooms, the students have learned that the way to change directions is to change minds, and the way to do that is resolve the conflicts, not worsen them.